

State Dept. review completed

17 October 1985

NOTE TO RECIPIENTS

1. The attached papers provide a new approach for assessing the likelihood of military coups in Honduras and Guatemala.

This series of papers is based on a methodology developed in the Office of Global Issues addressing coup prospects throughout the Third World, a project undertaken at the request of the Director of Central Intelligence.

2. I hope you find the papers--and especially the list of indicators that accompanies the summary--helpful in identifying key factors that could precipitate a coup in countries you monitor. If you have any comments or questions, contact

Chief/Political Instability Branch, OGI

Chief, Foreign Subversion and  
Instability Center, OGI

ATTACHMENTS:

1. "Honduras: Prospects for  
a Military Coup"
2. "Guatemala: Prospects for  
a Military Coup"

**GUATEMALA: PROSPECTS FOR A MILITARY COUP\*****PREFACE**

This memorandum explores whether and under what circumstances a military coup is likely to occur in Guatemala. Our intention is not to pinpoint the actual timing of a coup, but to highlight indicators that might alter prospects for military intervention and to discuss the implications of various coup scenarios for US interests. The paper is designed for specialists in the area and omits background detail. [REDACTED]

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The paper is one of a series that applies a set of more than thirty coup indicators, grouped into three categories, to countries of key concern to the United States. First, we look at the setting to determine the society's tolerance for coup plotting. Then, we assess the institutional predisposition of the military to intervene. Finally, specific motives are identified that might accumulate and provoke the military to mount a coup. [REDACTED]

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Our research indicates that when the first two factors are low, a coup is unlikely to occur despite the aggregation of a large number of motives. On the other hand, when the society and military are judged to be highly coup-prone, the presence of only a few motives can precipitate a coup. As a general rule, we have found that factors associated with the setting are slow to change, while those relating to the motives are more volatile and thus more critical in determining the overall rating. [REDACTED]

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The discussion is keyed directly to the list of indicators that accompanies the summary. These indicators were constructed from extensive research of more than one hundred coups in the Third World over the past three decades. [REDACTED]

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\*This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] Foreign Subversion and Instability Center, Office of Global Issues. It has been coordinated with the Office of African and Latin American Analysis and reflects extensive discussions with country experts in Guatemala. Information available as of 1 October was used in this report. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to [REDACTED] Chief, Political Instability Branch [REDACTED]

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**SUMMARY**

Guatemala is preparing for its first civilian government in 19 years with an election scheduled for 3 November and a run-off in December. Our indicators suggest that prospects for a military coup in Guatemala before a civilian regime can settle in are relatively low--less than 25 percent. Although domestic tensions make Guatemalan society somewhat vulnerable to coup-plotting and the military is a highly coup-prone institution, none of the motives for military intervention appears strong enough to galvanize the armed forces into action over the near term. [REDACTED]

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A further deterioration in domestic security conditions could lead the present government to impose tighter controls over political activity until the inauguration of the new regime in January--or even to select another general to oversee the transition in place of current Chief of State General Oscar Mejia. We doubt, however, that such developments would interrupt the return to civilian rule. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, we expect the present political consensus between the military and moderate civilian elites to erode during 1986 as the new regime wrestles with chronic economic problems, and defense officials--unaccustomed to accommodation--try to work out their relationship with the civilian government. Incentives for another coup would grow, for example, if civilian leaders interfered with professional military matters, adopted a left-leaning foreign policy, failed to handle domestic unrest, or resorted to excessive corruption or repression to maintain themselves in power. [REDACTED]

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Although we see little prospect now of a military move to suspend the election indefinitely or to remove the civilian regime before it has a chance to establish itself, such action would pose a major setback to US interests in the region. Once a new regime settled in, the impact of a coup would depend on who launched it and whether they intended a permanent political realignment or a temporary corrective action. [REDACTED]

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A conspiracy between conservative senior officers and extreme rightist political groups to restore Guatemala's traditional autocracy would seriously strain relations with Washington, given the past association of such groups with human rights abuses. By contrast, if moderate senior officers seized power in a crisis situation and promised to schedule new elections, the United States probably would retain--and perhaps increase--its leverage in Guatemala, assuming bilateral assistance programs were already well on track. [REDACTED]

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A coup by reform-minded junior officers would pose more difficult choices for the United States. Although Washington initially might be inclined to support moves toward clean government and economic restructuring, over the longer term we believe such a coup probably would generate destabilizing infighting within both the private sector and the military itself. [REDACTED]

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**Guatemala: Indicators of an Impending Military Coup****Applicability**

● High  
○ Medium

● Low  
Not applicable

**The Setting: Predisposition of the Society and Military Toward a Military Coup**

The mere desire of a general (or a sergeant) to seize power may not be sufficient to ensure a successful military coup. The lack of strong political institutions and eroding government legitimacy in most cases are prerequisites for the military to consider intervention.

**The Political and Socioeconomic Environment**

- History of nonconstitutional or nondemocratic transfer of power
- Uncertain succession procedures
- Lack of popular respect for government leadership
- Personalistic politics rather than strong political institutions
- Weak civilian elite support for the government
- Ideological divisions between government and one or more elements in society
- Widespread chronic civil disorder, other than insurgency
- Ethnic or tribal conflict
- Chronic economic difficulties
- Exogenous complications (International debt, regional tensions, agricultural prices, oil costs)
- Country specific indicator: Insensitivity to international public opinion
- Overall rating of the society as coup prone

**The Background of the Military**

- History of participation in coup plots and attempts
- Self-image among the military of its role as protector of the country's values, interests, or constitution
- Military factionalism and coalition building (classes, generations, training)
- Power unchecked by regime (unified command, longstanding field assignments)
- Absence or weakness of functional rivals (national guard, popular militia, security force)
- Active involvement in the political process
- Disdain for civilian politicians and political institutions
- Close ties between some military leaders and opposition groups
- Overall rating of the military as coup prone

**The Motives: Factors Motivating the Military to Intervene**

A military coup—rarely a random event—grows out of a coup prone setting. It also involves the accumulation of motives that prompt the military to intervene.

- Retention of power by government leaders beyond constitutional time limits, or attempts to do so
- Extension of the government's power into constitutionally-prohibited areas; arbitrary application of law
- Perception among military of incoming government leadership as antithetical to military's interests
- Government interference in military's professional autonomy (assignments, training, strategies)
- Government attacks against military's corporate interests (pay, promotion, benefits)
- Major policy differences between government and military leaders
- Inability of government leadership to coopt or suppress opposition groups
- Difficulty in containing terrorism or insurgency
- Difficulty in maintaining public order
- Public perception of gross government mismanagement as responsible for economic problems, including loss of foreign aid
- Public discontent over flagrant corruption
- Country-specific indicator: Government investigation or prosecution of human rights abuses by military officers
- Country-specific indicator: Tension between military and government over the Mexican border or Belize
- Military's overall dissatisfaction with the current situation

**• LEVEL OF CONCERN THAT A MILITARY COUP MIGHT BE ATTEMPTED WITHIN SIX MONTHS**

**THE SETTING**

The upcoming election in Guatemala will be the first ever without an announced military candidate. Based on the military's heavy involvement in Guatemalan politics in the past, a smooth transition would seem unlikely. However, new factors such as an increasingly troublesome economy and a growing desire for US security assistance appear to have altered the traditional political dynamic, at least for the present. [REDACTED]

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**Political and Socioeconomic Indicators**

On balance, we consider Guatemalan society to be moderately tolerant of coup-plotting. [REDACTED]

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As the list of coup indicators shows, Guatemala exhibits some of the characteristics of a highly coup-prone society. The country has had a long history of non-democratic transfers of power: Elections often were rigged even when a constitution was in force. In addition, the military's traditional heavy involvement in Guatemalan political life has led to a reliance on personalistic politics rather than strong political institutions. [REDACTED]

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Although a new electoral law provides for an orderly transfer of power in January, the political succession procedures are untested. Moreover, certain tensions within the society--such as the presence of a strong Evangelical Protestant community within the largely Catholic country, human rights abuses by extremists from the political right as well as the left, and a rural-based Communist insurgency begun in the 1960s--contribute

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[redacted]

to an atmosphere of uncertainty that could play into the hands of potential coup plotters. [redacted]

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The Guatemalan economy also is in poor shape, although serious problems are a relatively recent phenomenon. The country is in dire need of foreign exchange to pay for fuel and other imports, inflation is rising, and pressure to renegotiate Guatemala's international debt is mounting. [redacted]

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Efforts by the current government to initiate reforms largely have failed due to Mejia's political naivete and, [redacted] attempts by extremists both on 25X1

the left and the right to incite public protests in hopes of cancelling the election. Widespread demonstrations in the capital in early September compelled the government to rescind a 50 per cent busfare hike and to promise wage and price adjustments. According to Embassy reporting, the crisis nearly cost Mejia his job when military officers, in touch with members of the private sector, considered installing a caretaker leader with more backbone. Rather than provoking the military to mount another coup now, however, we believe the magnitude of Guatemala's economic problems has reinforced the desire of military leaders to turn the government over to civilians. [redacted]

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In contrast to the above factors, several important coup indicators are virtually absent in the Guatemalan setting. The Embassy reports that there is considerable popular respect for President Mejia's leadership in moving toward civilian rule and making progress against the insurgents. Most important, the military establishment appears as anxious as civilian economic groups to improve Guatemala's international standing and gain

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renewed access to IMF funding and other foreign credit. We believe that the armed forces' current strong desire for a resumption of US economic and military assistance also puts a powerful damper on coup plotting. From the military's perspective, aid not only would strengthen the armed forces professionally, but bolster the economy, thereby undermining support for the guerrilla cause. [REDACTED]

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### **Military Indicators**

According to our indicators, the military remains a highly coup-prone institution. [REDACTED]

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The Guatemalan armed forces, driven by their self-image as the protector of the country's values and interests, have a long history of participation in coup attempts.\* Their power is largely unchecked by the current military regime, despite the transfer of some government offices to civilian control in preparation for the changeover in January. Military factionalism has grown over the past decade, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] as junior officers--particularly from the 1970 and 1973 classes at the military academy--have pressed for military and political reforms. These officers staged the coup that brought General Efraim Rios Montt to power in 1982. [REDACTED]

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\*The Guatemalan armed forces consist of some 44,600 active duty troops, supplemented by 915,000 lightly-trained Civil Defense Forces and 9,500 National Police. [REDACTED]

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[redacted] Competition between the Army and various

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paramilitary organizations involved in the counterinsurgency

effort also has been on the rise in recent years. [redacted]

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Although respect for civilian politicians and the democratic process has never been high in the armed forces, the US Embassy reports that, despite the unrest in September, all levels of the military continue to endorse the timetable to elect a civilian ruler. Following the pattern set for the Constituent Assembly elections in 1984, the Mejia government has prohibited military involvement in pre-election politics this year and excluded the military from voting. [redacted]

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Mejia also has kept close tabs on divergent views within the officer corps [redacted]

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[redacted] Furthermore, ties between elements of the military and opposition groups have not undermined the military's basic commitment to the electoral process. [redacted]

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#### INDICATORS OF COUP MOTIVES

None of the motives for military intervention appears strong enough to galvanize the Guatemalan military into mounting a coup before the new government settles in, although we expect tensions to increase substantially during 1986. [redacted]

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As reflected in our list of indicators, Mejia has been adhering to his announced timetable calling for a November

[redacted]

election, a December run-off between the top two vote-getters, and the inauguration of his successor in January 1986. To avoid antagonizing the civilian elites or factions within the military during the transitional process, Mejia has not abused his considerable authority, nor has his administration been characterized by flagrant corruption. In June 1985, for example, his removal of the corrupt officer who headed the National Police reportedly met with widespread approval, even within the military. Mejia's most heavy-handed move--the sudden imposition of strong austerity measures last April--illustrated his political inexperience more than a deliberate disregard for the consultative process, according to Embassy reporting. When opposition mounted, he rescinded the economic measures. [redacted]

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The military has few professional grievances against the government, largely because senior officers are in control. The military has had a free hand to manage its counterinsurgency campaign and can point to successes against the guerrillas in the rural highlands and on the urban front. Human rights abuses by the military have generated tensions in the past but, in our view, are not a major issue at present. [redacted]

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A few factors on our list could become more threatening prior to the scheduled inauguration of a new government in January. As the transition process proceeds, the military might become increasingly anxious about the policies likely to be pursued by an incoming government. For example, if pre-election polls or backroom deals before the December run-off indicated that far-rightist presidential candidate Mario Sandoval or

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centrist candidate Jorge Serrano were pulling ahead, we believe some military factions might advocate preemptive action. According to Embassy reporting, these candidates have waged strongly anti-government campaigns and might try to restructure the military establishment if elected. Similarly, the military might be motivated to intervene if incidents of terrorism, insurgency, or civil violence escalated during the campaign to the point of jeopardizing future US assistance. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Although incentives for military intervention could grow, we doubt this would push Guatemala into the high risk category over the near term. [REDACTED] the military High Command is determined to see the transition succeed and will not tolerate any effort to disrupt the process. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] It also would be difficult, we judge, for disgruntled individuals to attract broad support--even after initial selections are made in November--since so many Guatemalan groups appear committed to the political transition process. [REDACTED]

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#### OUTLOOK AND POTENTIAL PRECIPITATING EVENTS

Two background indicators are focal to our attempt to examine coup prospects in the post-election period. First, the

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military will continue to be convinced of its ability and right to rule should a serious national crisis erupt. Second, the values needed to legitimize democratic rule--and to ensure the government's continuance in office--are weak in Guatemala due to the long progression of authoritarian regimes. [REDACTED]

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Political-military dynamics in 1986 probably will not be influenced greatly by which candidate wins the November election. Front-runners Vinicio Cerezo and Jorge Carpio are both relative moderates with whom the military appears willing to try to work out an arrangement--at least initially. [REDACTED]

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Even if the election were close, we judge that the loser would not be able to command sufficient military or civilian support to challenge the outcome. [REDACTED]

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In our view, the key factors to monitor in the post-election period will be:

- o The new president's personal style of leadership.
- o Policy differences between the military and the new government.
- o The level of support for the government among civilian elites (particularly among economic interest groups).
- o The degree of interference by civilian leaders in what the military considers its professional realm. [REDACTED]

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The successful installation of a civilian government should resolve many uncertainties and lead to closer ties with the United States--steps that will please the military and dampen coup-plotting. Demonstrable progress on the economic front--

albeit difficult to achieve--could earn the new administration an extended honeymoon. The armed forces doubtless will continue to wield considerable influence behind the scenes, but they probably will be less directly involved in the political process under the civilian regime. [REDACTED]

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Of critical importance, however, is the likelihood that the present national political consensus will erode as the new regime begins to wrestle with chronic economic problems and the military--unaccustomed to accommodation--tries to work out its relationship with the new government. We believe the following socio-political factors currently mitigate against the chances of a coup but could change under the new administration, thereby increasing the society's vulnerability to military intervention:

- o With no progress on the economic front under Mejia, the new government will inherit the full plate of economic woes. We believe that civilian leaders will be hard-pressed--because of competing interests among political elites--to formulate and implement programs rapidly enough to head off social unrest.
- o Once appointments in the new administration are confirmed, incentives for cooperation among the thirteen remaining registered parties, powerful private sector groups, and the new government will decrease. Moreover, historical animosities, such as those between Carpio's center-right party and Sandoval's group on the extreme right, also will undercut support for new government initiatives.
- o If the civilian regime focuses on pressing urban economic issues to the detriment of rural Indian concerns, the guerrillas might be able to fan ethnic tensions.
- o The civilian regime might have difficulty dealing with exogenous factors--such as a drop in world coffee prices, a rise in oil costs, deteriorating security conditions in neighboring countries, or rejections by international creditors.
- o Proud of having carried on without US assistance since 1977, Guatemala's present desire to strengthen bilateral

relations could dissipate if strong conditions are attached to potential offers of aid, more aid is promised--or expected by Guatemala City--than Washington can deliver, or the United States skews the domestic political line-up by favoring a particular group economically. [redacted]

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Factionalism in the armed forces and ties between disgruntled officers and opposition groups are likely to grow during 1986 as the military redefines its role in the political process. In our view, the military would be more inclined to oust the new civilian leadership under the following conditions:

- o Civilian leaders began to interfere in military affairs by imposing a new strategy for dealing with the insurgents. Center-left candidate Cerezo has already said he might be willing to negotiate with the guerrilla groups. Attempts to transfer the Civil Defense Forces to civilian control also would anger the military which considers the village militias the backbone of its successful counterinsurgency program.
  - o The new government forced large numbers of military leaders to retire. Existing legislation only requires the retirement of Chief-of-State Mejia as part of the transition process.
  - o Anticipated austerity measures slashed defense spending disproportionately.
  - o Civilian officials decided to prosecute military personnel for past human rights violations or other abuses of authority.
  - o The new foreign minister promoted Central American summitry or bilateral rapprochements with Nicaragua--thereby jeopardizing US aid prospects and increasing the likelihood of external support for Guatemalan insurgents.
  - o Strong austerity measures angered the landowning and industrial classes and caused serious capital flight, or resulted in public rioting that the government appeared unable to contain.
  - o Blatant corruption and government-sponsored repression and terrorism reached levels close to that which caused the rupture of the US aid relationship in 1977. [redacted]
- As motives accumulated, tensions would rise. Some of the

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motivating factors listed above could even provide the trigger

mechanism--the precipitating event--that finally provoked coup conspirators to act. An actual meeting between government and insurgent leaders, the scheduling of a public trial of military officers, or the signing of a diplomatic accord with Nicaragua, for example, could become the final straw destroying the military's tolerance of civilian initiatives. Other potential precipitating events might be:

- o A decision by the civilian government to renege on promises made to the military regarding the naming of particular officers to top positions. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] We believe the nomination of a civilian as Secretary of Defense also would be unacceptable to the military. 25X1

- o The assassination of the new president, particularly if the military did not trust the constitutional succession mechanism or if paralysis of the political process contributed to serious public disorder. Cerezo reportedly already was targetted for assassination during the campaign period.
- o A government order to the armed forces to stay in the barracks during largescale rioting over food, fuel, or transportation prices, or, conversely, an order to break up relatively peaceful demonstrations with excessive force. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Senior officers would be in the best position to mount a successful coup, particularly if--as we anticipate--top-ranking officers retain their jobs. However, mid-level officers who hold key staff positions in the mobile battalions also would have a chance, according to Embassy [redacted] Military units in the capital--particularly the First Brigade, the Presidential Honor Guard, the Air Force's "Grupo Tactico," or the airborne unit--historically have played the leading role.

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Transportation difficulties would prevent most outlying units from participating directly. [REDACTED]

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#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

In the unlikely event of a military coup that indefinitely suspended plans to hold elections in Guatemala or removed a civilian regime before it had a chance to initiate economic programs or strengthen political institutions, US interests in the region would suffer a major setback. Hopes that the Guatemalan example would strengthen the trend toward democratic governments in the region would be quashed. If aid were restricted once again, the chance to develop Guatemala's strong private sector and capitalize on its relatively successful counterinsurgency effort would be hurt. Over the near term, we believe a coup also would weaken leverage to stem the flow of illegal arms into Central America, reduce border tensions with Mexico, and influence the Contadora process. Although a postponement of elections could prove less troublesome for US interests than outright cancellation, the benefits of improved relations for both sides would hinge mostly on how soon new elections would be scheduled. [REDACTED]

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Once a civilian regime had settled in and begun to implement its economic and political program, the impact of a coup would depend largely on who launched it and whether they intended it as a permanent realignment or a temporary corrective action. The greatest setback to US interests would occur if conservative senior military officers successfully conspired with extreme



rightist political groups to bring down the government.

Distrustful of any moderate regime, rightist leaders--including Sandoval and perennial coup-plotter Lionel Sisniega--probably will try to exploit the inevitable missteps of an inexperienced administration to restore power permanently to Guatemala's traditional oligarchy. Prickly about past US criticism of rightist death squad activity, this group most likely would reject US aid if even the slightest strings were attached. [REDACTED]

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If more moderate senior officers--such as those overseeing the present transition--staged a coup to control escalating unrest or to prevent a purge of the armed forces, the United States probably would retain significant leverage. Despite their current willingness to hand over Guatemala's problems to someone else, we judge that some regime leaders would be willing to retake power if the civilian experiment failed to bring hoped for stability and growth. Billing the move as a corrective action and promising to schedule new elections when the crisis had passed, this group probably could maintain the confidence of foreign lenders if it agreed to work with the IMF. Using already established aid programs, Washington might be able to press Guatemala for greater accommodation with US policies in return for support through the crisis period. [REDACTED]

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If reform-minded junior officers, already unhappy over pocketbook issues, attempted a coup because the regime had neglected needed economic reforms or proved too corrupt, the United States would be faced with difficult choices. While Washington initially might be inclined to support moves toward

[redacted]

clean government and economic restructuring, over the longer term such a coup probably would generate increasing domestic tensions. As in 1982 when Guatemala's only junior-officer-instigated coup brought Rios Montt to power, young officers might be slow to return the government to civilians. Moreover, rivalries within the armed forces probably would sharpen as junior officers exercised political power inconsistent with their places in the chain of command. A divided military most likely would weaken the new government's ability to implement programs and contain the insurgency, and ultimately could lead to further intrigue and regime change. [redacted]

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**HONDURAS: PROSPECTS FOR A MILITARY COUP\*****PREFACE**

This memorandum explores whether and under what circumstances a military coup is likely to occur in Honduras. Our intention is not to pinpoint the actual timing of a coup, but to highlight indicators that might alter prospects for military intervention and to discuss the implications of various coup scenarios for US interests. The paper is designed for specialists in the area and omits background detail. [REDACTED]

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Our research indicates that when the first two factors are low, a coup is unlikely to occur despite the aggregation of a large number of motives. On the other hand, when the society and military are judged to be highly coup-prone, the presence of only a few motives can precipitate a coup. As a general rule, we have found that factors associated with the setting are slow to change, while those relating to the motives are more volatile and thus more critical in determining the overall rating. [REDACTED]

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\*This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] Foreign Subversion and Instability Center, Office of Global Issues. It has been coordinated with the Office of African and Latin American Analysis and reflects extensive discussions with country experts in Honduras. Information available as of 21 September was used in this report. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to [REDACTED] Chief, Political Instability Branch [REDACTED]

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**SUMMARY**

We believe there is about an even chance that the Honduran military will mount a coup during the next six months. We rate Honduran society as highly coup-prone and the institutional predisposition of the military to mount coups as high. We suspect, however, that the military lacks sufficient motivation at present to initiate a coup largely because it does not want to risk disruption in US aid and believes that continued democratic rule helps ensure domestic stability. [REDACTED]

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A coup could take place before the November election, in our view, if the various political contenders engage in major campaign irregularities that provoke serious public unrest. Moreover, in a coup-prone country like Honduras, the military's justification for mounting a coup need not be as strong as in a country lacking a history of coup attempts. [REDACTED]

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Prospects for a military coup most likely will grow after the newly elected government assumes office in January 1986. A key indicator to watch is whether infighting in the political arena diminishes the new president's ability to cope with pressing economic problems and manage the relationship with the United States. Furthermore, close attention should be paid to the possibility of coup plotting arising from growing factionalism within the military, the ambition of an individual military leader, or military leadership changes scheduled for January 1987. [REDACTED]

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Honduras's tentative attempts to build democracy present the United States with opportunities as well as risks. The dire need

[REDACTED]

for economic and military assistance gives the United States leverage in pressing for democratic rule which, if it flourishes, would represent an important stabilizing ingredient in Central America. On the other hand, we are concerned that some Honduran military officers might mount a coup if they perceived that a civilian government was allowing Washington to take Honduras for granted or force it to take action concerning El Salvador and Nicaragua that conflicted with Honduran interests. [REDACTED]

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## THE SETTING

### Political and Socioeconomic Indicators

Honduran society is highly coup prone, as illustrated by the ratings that appear on our indicators list. [REDACTED]

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The military has launched coups on numerous occasions over the past few decades, usually on behalf of an individual senior military officer. Moreover, the constitutional mechanisms for succession have never been tested. [REDACTED]

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Over the years, civilian governments rarely have been efficient or honest enough to have earned the public's respect; most political leaders have pursued patronage, power, and privilege to the detriment of genuine reform. Although President Suazo still enjoys some popular support, many Hondurans see his government as composed of corrupt and manipulative hacks. [REDACTED]

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Honduras also is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Its dependence on a small number of agricultural exports--chiefly bananas and coffee--often results in boom and bust cycles which fan popular discontent. On the other hand, the

**Honduras: Indicators of an Impending Military Coup****Applicability**

● High  
○ Medium

• Low  
Not applicable

**The Setting: Predisposition of the Society and Military Toward a Military Coup**

The mere desire of a general (or a sergeant) to seize power may not be sufficient to ensure a successful military coup. The lack of strong political institutions and eroding government legitimacy in most cases are prerequisites for the military to consider intervention.

**The Political and Socioeconomic Environment**

- History of nonconstitutional or nondemocratic transfer of power
- Uncertain succession procedures
- Lack of popular respect for government leadership
- Personalistic politics rather than strong political institutions
- Weak civilian elite support for the government
- Ideological divisions between government and one or more elements in society
- Widespread chronic civil disorder, other than insurgency
- Ethnic or tribal conflict
- Chronic economic difficulties
- Exogenous complications (presence of anti-Sandinista guerrillas and Salvadoran refugee camps)
- Loss of superpower patron-client support
- Country-specific indicator: History of popular activism
- Overall rating of the society as coup prone

**The Background of the Military**

- History of participation in coup plots and attempts
- Self-image among the military of its role as protector of the country's values, interests, or constitution
- Military factionalism and coalition building (classes, generations, training)
- Power unchecked by regime (unified command, longstanding field assignments)
- Absence or weakness of functional rivals (national guard, popular militia, security force)
- Active involvement in the political process
- Disdain for civilian politicians and political institutions
- Close ties between some military leaders and opposition groups
- Country-specific indicator: Weak sense of professionalism
- Overall rating of the military as coup prone

**The Motives: Factors Motivating the Military to Intervene**

A military coup—rarely a random event—grows out of a coup prone setting. It also involves the accumulation of motives that prompt the military to intervene.

- Retention of power by government leaders beyond constitutional time limits, or attempts to do so
- Extension of the government's power into constitutionally prohibited areas; arbitrary application of law
- Perception among military of incoming government leadership as antithetical to military's interests
- Government interference in military's professional autonomy (assignments, training, strategies)
- Government attacks against military's corporate interests (pay, promotion, benefits)
- Major policy differences between government and military leaders
- Inability of government leadership to coopt or suppress opposition groups
- Difficulty in containing terrorism or insurgency
- Difficulty in maintaining public order
- Public perception of gross government mismanagement as responsible for economic problems
- Public discontent over flagrant corruption
- Tension between military and government over border conflict or foreign war
- Country-specific indicator: Ambitions of individual military leaders
- Country-specific indicator: Fraudulent or violent election campaign
- Country-specific indicator: Fifth promotion leaders refuse to rotate power to other military leaders
- Military's overall dissatisfaction with the current situation

○ LEVEL OF CONCERN THAT A MILITARY COUP MIGHT BE ATTEMPTED WITHIN SIX MONTHS

gap between rich and poor is not conspicuously wide, the left is small and fragmented, and large scale civil disorder has been rare. Substantial US economic and military assistance also has helped fend off major crises. [REDACTED]

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### **Military Indicators**

The indicators that describe the background of the military reveal a strong, historically-derived predisposition to mount coups. [REDACTED]

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The military has governed directly in all but two of the eighteen years that preceded President Suazo's inauguration in 1982. The armed forces remain the key institution in society, frequently maneuvering behind the scenes to resolve political issues. Furthermore, the Constitution that was approved in 1982 gives the military broad powers to maintain domestic order and to guarantee free elections and presidential succession. As there are no constitutional checks and balances, the armed forces usually act as the final political arbiter. Moreover, civilian leaders lack the ability to restrict the military, which, with its unified command structure, operates unimpeded by any countervailing force such as a national guard. [REDACTED]

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Although the armed forces present a facade of unity to outsiders, several factions compete for power. The most important are the so-called "Promotions," each of which represents a graduating class from the military academy. The Promotions generally consult among themselves on how key positions are to be allocated. According to Embassy sources, the Fifth Promotion currently is in the ascendancy, but it is

expected to rotate power to the Sixth. US Embassy observers believe another fissure line is represented by the difference between officers--mostly of the older generation--who are seeking only to enrich themselves through corruption and other officers--usually younger--who believe the military must become more professional. [REDACTED]

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Many officers also retain close ties to political parties. In the 1930s and 1960s, conservative National Party leaders worked with military officers to mount a coup against the Liberal government of the day, and US Embassy reporting indicates that one of the reasons behind Alvarez's ouster in 1984 was his dabbling in National Party politics. National Party leaders also tried unsuccessfully to provoke the military into ousting Suazo when a major political crisis developed last April. Again in August, politicians and businessmen brought strong pressure on the military to intervene and bring order to an increasingly unruly presidential campaign. [REDACTED]

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Despite such political maneuvering, the trend has been toward greater professionalism in the ranks, spurred in part by the military's growing awareness of the benefits of democratic rule--especially US aid. [REDACTED]

military leaders were proud of the restraint they demonstrated recently when the following crises were overcome without resorting to a coup:

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- o Conflict over military leadership after General Alvarez's ouster.
- o Suazo's attempts to maintain himself in power beyond constitutionally set time limits.



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- o Differences over how political groups denied official recognition could participate in the November election.

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#### INDICATORS OF COUP MOTIVES

We believe the military at present is not sufficiently motivated to move against Suazo as shown by the small number of indicators rated high on our list. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] military officers believe civilian rule must be preserved in order to avoid risking a disruption of US aid. The military also is concerned that its self-image as "the conscience of the people" would be eroded if it proved incapable of governing at a time of growing economic difficulties. Moreover, many military officers still believe they can exert sufficient leverage behind the scenes to persuade civilian leaders to do things their way. [REDACTED]

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While we believe the chances of a coup are less than even over the next three months, we judge that the situation in Honduras is unstable because relatively few motives would be needed to spark a coup attempt. The ouster of General Alvarez in 1984, for example, was preceded by little obvious evidence that it was being planned. In a country renowned for its "personalismo" politics and the propensity for nationalistic and idealistic military officers to throw out the old, the prospects for a coup before the election might increase significantly if the President:

- o Fraudulently manipulated the electoral process to get his candidate elected--which, according to US Embassy reporting, seems possible--and public protests erupted involving labor and campesino groups threatening public order.

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- o Acted unconstitutionally by resurrecting his "continuismo" attempts to stay in office beyond acceptable time limits. [REDACTED]

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The military would be motivated to mount a coup shortly after the election if, in our view, some of the following events occurred:

- o The undistinguished candidate backed by Suazo--Oscar Mejia Orellano--wins narrowly but is accused of massive voting fraud by the opposition, and a fragmented, contentious Congress paralyzes decisionmaking.
- o Suazo's candidate wins the election and surrounds himself with incompetent, venal advisers who then collectively engage in gross corruption.
- o The incoming government is unable to stem rapid economic deterioration, and public protests--led by workers and campesino groups--build to a general strike, threatening civil order.
- o Jose Azcona--one of the Liberal Party candidates and reputedly honest--wins the presidency despite opposition from Suazo and some of the military. He then excludes the military from the selection of a cabinet, begins to interfere in the military's internal prerogatives, and tries to weed out corrupt senior officers.
- o The National Party loses the election and then works behind the scenes with its contacts in the military to oust the government.
- o An unacceptable leftist, such as Carlos Roberto Riena of the M-Lider splinter of the Liberal Party, is elected president. [REDACTED]

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We believe that chances for a coup probably will increase after a newly elected government is installed in January. We anticipate that senior officers under General Walter Lopez would allow the new government a grace period of about one year, after which we judge that a decision by them to become directly involved in policymaking will depend on the government's performance and--more important--on the military's ability to shape policy behind the scenes. [REDACTED]

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Motivation for a coup could rise, for example, if:

- o The government is perceived by the military as making unacceptable concessions to El Salvador--still viewed as the country's traditional enemy--with regard to Salvadoran refugee camps or the border dispute.
- o The government permits the anti-Sandinista guerrilla bases in Honduras to become more overt and attracts international publicity in a way that offends national pride.
- o The government turns leftward in its foreign policy and attempts to improve relations with Nicaragua and Cuba.

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We suspect that the most crucial test of the military's dedication to civilian rule may come in January 1987 when military leadership changes are scheduled to take place. Coup prospects would heighten dramatically if the agreement between the Fifth and Sixth Promotions broke down, an opportunistic senior officer grabbed for power, or civilian leaders tried to influence military succession issues unduly.

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#### POTENTIAL PRECIPITATING EVENTS AND CONSPIRATORS

Even if a substantial number of indicators of coup motives shift to a rating of high, we believe that a precipitating event--a trigger mechanism--usually is necessary to provoke coup conspirators to act. In our view, the most likely triggers would be a sudden, acute political or economic crisis following the election; a dramatic disturbance of the US-Honduran relationship; or the eruption of serious infighting among military officers.

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Should a coup occur, it probably would be generated by senior officers of the Fifth Promotion--who command the most

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important operational units--or by a few firebrands in the Sixth Promotion who have been angered by both the Fifth Promotion and the civilian government. We believe that the coup conspirators would not risk the prospect of violent opposition from other units and would proceed with their plotting only if other officers either gave tacit approval or promised to remain neutral. [REDACTED]

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In our view, the most likely coup instigators in the Fifth Promotion would include Col. William Said Speer, who commands the Armored Calvary; Col. Leonel Riera Lunatti, who commands the First Infantry Battalion; Col. L. Gutierrez Minera, who commands the Second Infantry Battalion; Col. Lufti Azzad Matute, Director of the Military Academy; and Col. Hector Aplicano Molina, intelligence chief of the armed forces. Likely Sixth Promotion candidates are Lt. Col. Mario Amaya Amaya who commands the Special Forces, and Lt. Col. Alvaro Romero Salgado, Chief of Army Operations. We doubt that the current armed forces chief, Air Force General Walter Lopez, would lead a coup except in the case of a grave national emergency. [REDACTED]

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#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

A coup that was motivated by growing government incompetence in the political and economic arena probably would be mounted by senior officers acting collegially. The military still enjoys popular respect, and we suspect that many Hondurans initially would support a coup under these circumstances. Support would diminish within several months, however, if a return to civilian

rule were not proposed. In any event, we believe Honduran support for US policy in Central America probably would not be affected unless the United States reduced its economic and political support for the regime. [REDACTED]

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We are less certain about the implications of a coup mounted by ambitious senior officers pursuing their own agenda or by middle grade officers distressed by lack of promotion, corruption, and similar grievances. In the first instance, we judge the new leader probably would seek a return to civilian rule as soon as possible in order to ensure continued US support. Unlike a regime established to keep Honduran democracy on track, however, the new leader probably would be opposed by others in the military as well as by civilian politicians and parties. Such opposition could prevent the government from ruling effectively and possibly lead to a period of political uncertainty that would benefit the left. [REDACTED]

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A coup by young reformist officers is a remote possibility, in our view, because of their lack of command positions. Nevertheless, the damage to US interests could be serious if they succeeded. Some young officers--especially those trained in Peru or Panama--are reported by US Embassy officials to be more intensely nationalistic than their superiors. If they came to power, we believe they would try to move Honduras away from its close relationship with the United States and perhaps even seek a modus vivendi with Nicaragua. [REDACTED]

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Washington would have some leverage in the event of an impending coup. The ongoing need for large amounts of economic

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and military assistance doubtless would give the United States some ability, if forewarned, to dissuade key military leaders from coup plotting. Even if a coup were to take place, we expect that the need for aid would constrain the new military government from acting against US interests. On the other hand, coup motives could burgeon if the military leadership believed the United States was taking Honduras for granted and pressing the government to take action inconsistent with Honduran interests and national pride.

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